

Influenza (Flu) FAQs

What is influenza (also called flu)?

The flu is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses that infect the nose, throat, and lungs. It can cause mild to severe illness, and at times can lead to death. The best way to prevent the flu is by getting a flu vaccine each year.

What are Signs and symptoms of flu?

People who have the flu often feel some or all of these signs and symptoms:

- Fever* or feeling feverish/chills (*It's important to note that not everyone with flu will have a fever.)
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Muscle or body aches
- Headaches
- Fatigue (very tired)
- Some people may have vomiting and diarrhea, though this is more common in children than adults.

How is the flu spread?

Most experts believe that flu viruses spread mainly by droplets made when people with flu cough, sneeze or talk. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby. Less often, a person might also get flu by touching a surface or object that has flu virus on it and then touching their own mouth, eyes or possibly their nose.

How long can a sick person spread flu to others?

You may be able to pass on the flu to someone else before you know you are sick, as well as while you are sick. Most healthy adults may be able to infect others beginning 1 day before symptoms develop and up to 5 to 7 days after becoming sick. Some people, especially young children and people with weakened immune systems, might be able to infect others for an even longer time.

How serious is the flu?

Certain people are at greater risk for serious complications if they get the flu. This includes older people, young children, pregnant women and people with certain health conditions (such as asthma, diabetes, or heart disease), and persons who live in facilities like nursing homes. Complications of flu can include bacterial pneumonia, ear infections, sinus infections, dehydration, and worsening of chronic medical conditions, such as congestive heart failure, asthma, or diabetes.

Flu seasons are unpredictable and can be severe. Over a period of 30 years, between 1976 and 2006, estimates of flu-associated deaths in the United States range from a low of about 3,000 to a high of about 49,000 people.

What can I do to protect myself from getting sick from flu?

CDC recommends a three-step approach to fighting the flu: vaccination, everyday preventive actions, and the correct use of antiviral drugs if your doctor recommends them.

- #1 The single best way to prevent the flu is to get a flu vaccine each season.
- #2 Take everyday actions to help prevent the spread of germs that cause respiratory illnesses.
 - Try to avoid close contact with sick people.
 - **If you are sick with flu-like illness, CDC recommends that you stay home for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone** except to get medical care or for other necessities. Your fever should be gone without the use of a fever reducing medicine.
 - While sick, limit contact with others as much as possible to keep from infecting them.
 - Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it.
 - Wash your hands often with soap and water. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand rub.
 - Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth. Germs spread this way.
 - Clean and disinfect surfaces and objects that may be contaminated with germs like the flu.
- #3 Take flu antiviral drugs if your doctor prescribes them.
 - If you get the flu, antiviral drugs can treat your illness. These drugs can make illness milder and shorten the time you are sick.
 - Antiviral drugs work best when started in the first 2 days of symptoms to treat people who are very sick (such as those who are hospitalized) or people who are sick with flu symptoms and who are at increased risk of severe flu illness.

What should I do if I get sick?

If you become ill with influenza symptoms you should stay home and avoid contact with other people except to seek medical care. Most people are able to recover at home from flu without medical care.

However, some people are at greater risk of serious flu-related complications. They are:

- Children younger than 5, but especially children younger than 2 years old
- People 65 and older
- Pregnant women
- People who have chronic health issues

Are there medicines to treat the flu?

Yes. Antiviral drugs are prescription medicines that fight against the flu. While a flu vaccine is the first and most important step in preventing flu, antiviral drugs are a second line of defense to treat the flu if you get sick.

Antiviral drugs are not sold over-the-counter; you must have a prescription to get them. Antiviral drugs are not a substitute for vaccination.

How long should I stay home if I'm sick?

CDC recommends that you stay home for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone except to get medical care or for other necessities. (Your fever should be gone without the use of a fever-reducing medicine.) Stay away from others as

much as possible to keep from making others sick. Continue to cover coughs and sneezes and wash hands even after you return to school or work. It is important to know that even if you don't have a fever, you may have flu and be contagious if you get flu symptoms.

When should I seek emergency care?

- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- Sudden dizziness
- Confusion
- Severe or persistent vomiting

Content source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases (NCIRD)

For more information, visit <http://www.cdc.gov/flu> or call 800-CDC-INFO. May 2013